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MAY A MAN MARRY HIS DECEASED WIFE'S SISTER?

CERTAINLY he may do this, if the law of the land allow it, and if the Word of God forbid it not. At present the law of the land disallows the marriage of a man with his deceased wife's sister: does the Word of God also forbid it?

It must be admitted, that the restrictions on marriage found in the eighteenth and twentieth chapters of Leviticus are of

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moral and perpetual obligation; since God has declared, that the nations whom He cast out before His people committed such things, and that therefore He abhorred them (Lev. xx. 23); and He warns His people not to do such things, "that the land spue not you out also, as it spued out the nations that were before you." (Lev. xviii. 28.)

The only point for our inquiry is this, Are the marriages in question in the catalogue of things forbidden? The answer is found in Lev. xviii. 6: "None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him:" and a man is near of kin to his wife's sister; for, when God instituted marriage, He made of twain one flesh; so that when a man marries a woman, her mother becomes his mother,

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her aunt, his aunt, her sister his sister. They are "near of kin," the Word of God putting no difference between relationships by marriage and relationships by blood; as is seen in Lev. xviii. 14, where a man is forbidden to marry his uncle's wife, because "she is thine aunt;" yet there is no blood-relationship between the parties; but she is become "near of kin to him," and to marry such an one is sin. (Lev. xviii. 6.) Now, a wife's sister is become near of kin to the husband; indeed, she ought to be regarded, and, in fact, is generally regarded, as a nearer relation than an uncle's wife. And, therefore, the Church has wisely judged, that for a man to marry his deceased wife's sister, is to marry one "near of kin to him," and a violation of the law of God.

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The above argument, it will be perceived, is not built upon an isolated text, which may be disputed; but upon the broad principle distinctly stated, and repeatedly referred to, in the marriage code promulgated by the Divine will, viz. "None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him.—See Lev. xviii. 6, 12, 13, 14, 17; xx. 19. It must be shown that this principle is inapplicable to the case of a man and his deceased wife's sister; or the conclusion is inevitable, that marriage between these parties is sinful and incestuous.

Two places of Scripture, viz., Deut. xxv. 5, and Lev. xviii. 18, seem to perplex very many persons, causing them to receive with hesitation the above statement, and to doubt whether the

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Divine will has been clearly expressed against the marriage of a man with his deceased wife's sister. A separate examination of these texts is therefore called for, to remove doubts which are not unreasonably entertained, and to clear the subject from the perplexity in which, by reason of these texts, it is confessedly involved.

1st, as to Deut. xxv. 5. The injunction here given is altogether exceptional. The general law under which it falls, and from which it is an exemption, is distinctly laid down at Lev. xviii. 16, and again at Lev. xx. 21, viz. "Thou shalt not marry thy brother's wife;" but the Sovereign Lawgiver conceding something to the excessive anxiety of all Jewish families not to be excluded

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from the hope of giving birth to the promised Messiah, we find a provision made under the law at Deut. xxv. 5, to meet that requirement of the Jewish community. It was an exemption from the common law granted to a favoured people for a special purpose, and was of course limited in duration to the fulfilment of that purpose.

2. As to Lev. xviii. 18. It is a mistake to apply this passage of Scripture to the case of brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, or to suppose that it abrogates and makes void the common law promulgated at Lev. xviii. 16, and repeated at Lev. xx. 21. That common law, binding on all mankind, under pain of God's abhorrence for any infringement of it, absolutely forbids a man to marry

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his brother's wife, and, of course, forbids a woman to marry her sister's husband. This is an everlasting ordinance, of universal and perpetual obligation. What is found written at Lev. xiii. 18 is, like the former text at Deut. xxv. 5, purely exceptional: it respects a matter applicable to the Jews only, and to them but for a limited period, that is, until the bringing in of a better and more perfect way.

The true meaning of Lev. xviii. 18, is to be gathered by considering its scope and purport. In the beginning of the world men necessarily married their nearest relations; but when the necessity ceased, a Divine restriction was laid upon marriage; the marriage covenant ordained in Paradise was republished

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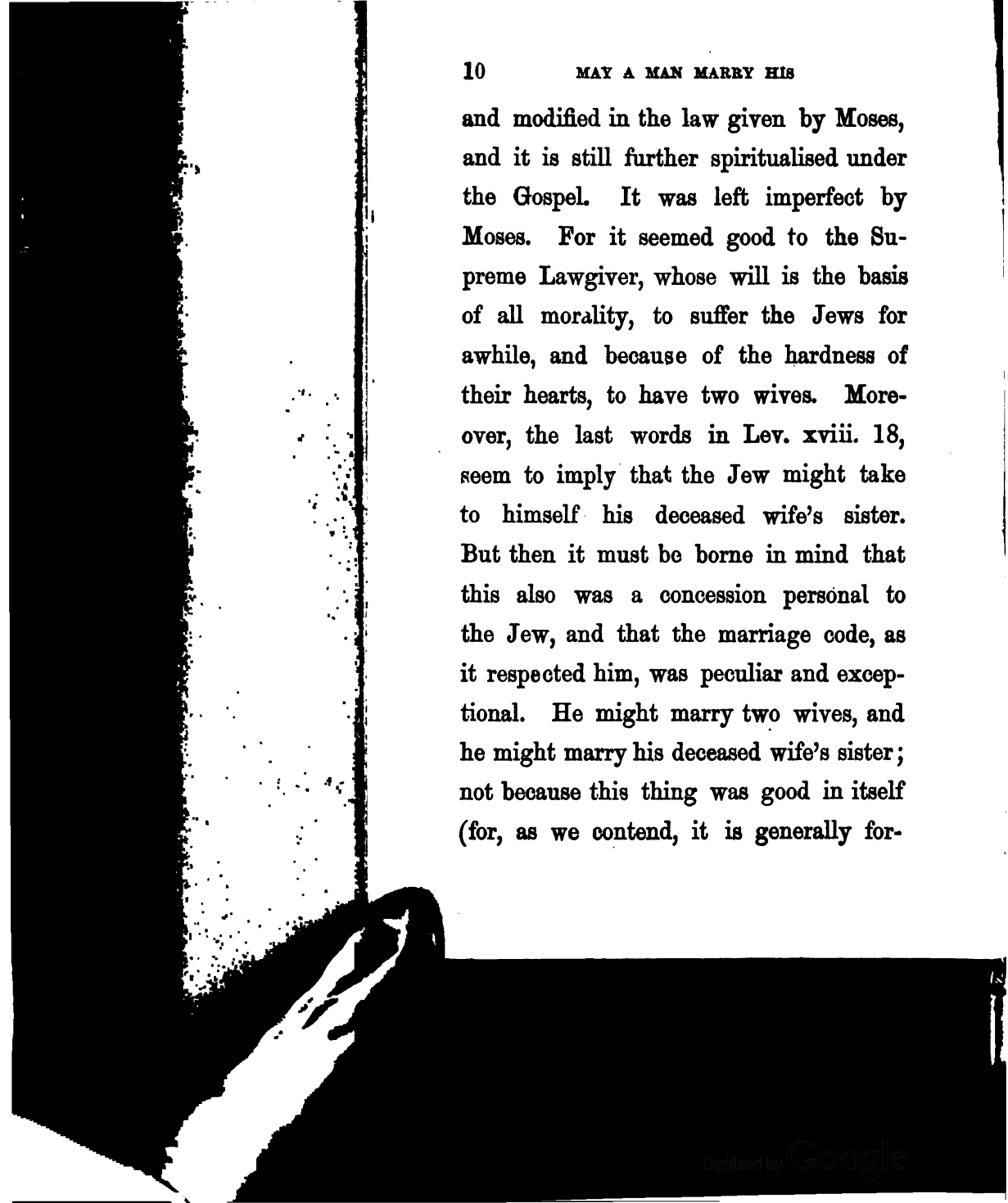
and modified in the law given by Moses, and it is still further spiritualised under the Gospel. It was left imperfect by Moses. For it seemed good to the Supreme Lawgiver, whose will is the basis of all morality, to suffer the Jews for awhile, and because of the hardness of their hearts, to have two wives. Moreover, the last words in Lev. xviii. 18, seem to imply that the Jew might take to himself his deceased wife's sister. But then it must be borne in mind that this also was a concession personal to the Jew, and that the marriage code, as it respected him, was peculiar and exceptional. He might marry two wives, and he might marry his deceased wife's sister; not because this thing was good in itself (for, as we contend, it is generally for-



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bidden at Lev. xviii, 6, 16, and xx. 21), but because it would be allowed to him as a Jew; allowed by the Sovereign Lawgiver; just as polygamy itself was allowed, not because it is good, but because of the hardness of men's hearts, and until better times. If, indeed, bigamy be allowable for a Christian man, then may he also marry his deceased wife's sister; the two practices have the like authority; the Scripture at Lev. xviii. 18 allows the Jew to do both these things; and the Christian who concludes from hence that he may do the one, may logically conclude that he may do the other; but not else.

To conclude. The purport of this place of Scripture (Lev. xviii. 18) is not to disannul the common law given at the

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sixteenth verse, but to limit in a particular point the Jew's license of exemption from that law. A special regulation is made with this view; but Christ in His Gospel (see Mark x. 6, 8) has withdrawn all license for this objectionable practice; and, of course, the license being withdrawn, the regulations by which it was controlled and modified are no longer in force. Therefore to urge this text in face of the plain declarations of Almighty God at Lev. xviii. 6, 16, in order to justify marriages between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, is to stretch it unwarrantably, and to overlook the mind of God in it.

Yet a Bill has passed the House of Commons, having for its object to legalise marriage between a man and his deceased

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wife's sister. And to meet the requirements of a comparatively small number of persons, who, through contempt or ignorance of God's Word, have contracted such marriages, this Christian nation is invited to change the law of the land, to incur the danger of God's "abhorrence," to place the public morality of England on a lower level than that of Scotland and Ireland; and finally, to introduce suspicion and estrangement into families where love and confidence have hitherto prevailed. Whilst, at the same time, it is certain, that for one widower who will benefit by the proposed change, hundreds will be deprived, from motives of delicacy, of the comfort and support hitherto generously and lovingly rendered by our sisters-in-law in cases of bereavement.

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Happily, by virtue of our excellent Constitution, a door is yet open to us whereby to escape from the threatened pollution. The Bill is about to be carried to the Upper House. Let us hope that the Lords spiritual and temporal will bring to its consideration a calmer and maturer judgment than can be expected from a popular assembly, of which very many members are notoriously unqualified to deal with religious questions.

And seeing the danger with which we are threatened, by the persevering efforts made, session after session, by those who desire to carry the Bill into a Law, let the Christian people of England resolve to return no man to Parliament at the next election, who will not pledge himself to oppose any Bill having for its object to

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